

November 8, 2002
AGENDA ITEM# 10

To: Delta Protection Commission

From: Margit Aramburu, Executive Director

Subject: Request for Support for Amendment of CALFED PSP Grant to
The Nature Conservancy for Acquisition of Easements in the Mokelumne
Watershed
(*For Commission Action*)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

The Commission should determine if the actions under the proposed amendment are consistent with the Commission's Plan and Act, and with the goals of the CALFED Ecosystem Restoration Plan (ERP).

BACKGROUND:

In 2001, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) submitted an application for a CALFED ecosystem restoration grant. The application was for \$3,044,342 for Cosumnes/Mokelumne Corridor Floodplain Acquisitions, Management and Restoration Planning. TNC identified the **ecozone** as Eastside Delta Tributaries, which is outside the Legal Delta.

The applications said "TNC will identify and acquire, from willing sellers, suitable parcels and conduct start-up stewardship activities, including baseline monitoring and preliminary restoration planning". The objectives of the proposal are:

- Protect existing riparian, wetland and aquatic habitats and associated species.
- Increase the capacity of the floodplain to store floodwaters by restoring channel-floodplain connectivity.
- Reestablish riparian, wetland, and aquatic habitats through restoration of natural processes and the reconnection of river to floodplains and tidal marshes.
- Facilitate population expansion of species associated with the Cosumnes and Mokelumne Rivers, particularly eastside tributary fall-run Chinook salmon, Sacramento Splittail, giant garter snake, ***greater Sandhill crane***, neotropical migrant bird species and waterfowl.

- ***Protect the habitat values on existing farmland by purchasing conservation easements that promote wildlife-friendly farming practices.***

The application states regarding land acquisition, "funds are requested for a block grant to provide for acquisition of properties not yet under option, but which are foreseen to be available for purchase in the near future. Depending upon the site, the applicant will propose the purchase of a fee or easement interest in land....Easement costs are averaging about \$1,500."

TNC's application stated "We have employed a number of rigorous hydrological and biological analyses to identify the target acquisition area, including the following: A hydrological study was conducted by Philip Williams and Associates (1997)...A report by crane biologists has identified the highest priority sites that provide foraging, loafing, and roosting for the state-listed greater Sandhill cranes (Littlefield and Ivey 2000) ...These analyses have helped us identify the most suitable area for fee and easement acquisition, management as a part of the Cosumnes River Preserve..."

The application indicated TNC would hold any interests in lands acquired, but TNC also said that interest might be transferred to another entity with the approval of the grantor.

STATUS OF THE GRANT APPLICATION:

The grant application was approved, but no contract has been signed and no funds have been transferred to TNC.

PROPOSED AMENDMENT:

TNC is requesting that the application/grant be amended to allow acquisition of wildlife-friendly agricultural easements in the East Delta ecozone. TNC would like to acquire easements that promote wildlife-friendly agriculture in support of the greater Sandhill Crane.

The proposed wildlife friendly farming easement would support the current, greater Sandhill crane-friendly crop types, such as small grains, and protect the properties from conversion to vineyard or orchard, or subdivision.

CONSISTENCY WITH COMMISSION'S PLAN AND ACT:

The Commission's Plan policies support long-term viability of commercial agriculture (Policy P-4). Policy P-8 states:

...encourage management of agricultural lands which maximize wildlife habitat seasonally and year-round, through techniques such as sequential flooding in fall and winter, leaving crop residue, creation of mosaic of small grains and flooded areas, controlling predators, controlling poaching, controlling public access, and others.

CONSISTENCY WITH CALFED ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROGRAM:

The CALFED ERP Plan (July 2000) includes a goal for Wildlife Friendly Agricultural Land for the Delta. The acreage goal for the 30-year life of the program is 40,000-75,000 acres. The acres are not divided by ecozone. The Delta Ecosystem Restoration Plan is under preparation and is due to be completed in 2003.

To date, CALFED has authorized funds to TNC for acquisition of 9,200 acres (Staten Island, San Joaquin County) in the East Delta ecozone to protect Wildlife Friendly Agriculture.

The CALFED ERP Plan includes the following actions for Agricultural Lands (p. 111):

- Increase the area of Delta cornfields and pastures flooded in winter and spring to provide high-quality foraging habitat for wintering and migrating waterfowl and shorebirds and associated wildlife.
- Periodically flood pasture from October through March in portions of the Delta relatively free of human disturbance to create suitable roosting habitat for wintering greater Sandhill crane, and for other wintering Sandhill crane subspecies.
- Create permanent or semi-permanent ponds in Delta farm areas that provide suitable waterfowl nesting habitat but lack suitable brooding habitat, to increase resident dabbling duck populations.
- Increase the acreage farmed for wheat and other crops that provide suitable nesting habitat for waterfowl and other ground-nesting species in the Delta.
- Convert agricultural lands in the Delta from crop types of low forage value for wintering waterfowl, wintering Sandhill cranes, and other wildlife to crop types of greater forage value.
- Defer fall tillage on cornfields in the Delta to increase the forage for wintering waterfowl, wintering Sandhill cranes, and associated wildlife.
- Develop a cooperative program to improve management on 8,000 acres of Delta corn and wheat fields and to reimburse farmers for leaving a portion of the crop in each field unharvested as forage for waterfowl, Sandhill cranes, and other wildlife.